

More Cloak Than Dagger —An 18th Century Spy

ROYAL SPY: The Strange Case of the Chevalier D'Eon. By Edna Nixon. 260 pages. Illustrated. Reynal and Co. \$5.75.

DAILY BOOK REVIEW

By Maurice Dolbier

CHARLES GENEVIEVE LOUIS AUGUSTE ANDRE TIMOTHEE DEON DE BEAUMONT, like all witty, talented, and ambitious young men, set out in life with the determination to make his name live in history. History has given little regard to that name, but it lives in the psychology texts; thanks to Havelock Ellis, who coined the term "eonism" for "the tendency to adopt the mental attitudes and habits and costume of the opposite sex."

Charles Deon (he earned the aristocratic particule later) was born into a distinguished provincial family in October, 1728, and came up from Burgundy to attend school in Paris when he was 12. He was a brilliant scholar; he obtained a law degree at an early age; he became an expert fencer; he was given a welcome entrance into the world of the Paris salons. Here he met the Prince de Conti and his strange career began.

Conti was the cousin of King Louis XV, and the chief of that monarch's peculiar organization, Le Secret du Roi, "a shadow government with its own ministers and ambassadors, whose existence was unsuspected by the official government, working behind the scenes." Through Conti's influence, "le petit Deon" became "Le Secret's" first secret agent, being sent to Russia to influence the Empress Elizabeth and in the guise of a lovely young woman called Mlle. Lia de Beaumont.

Mlle. Lia's efforts were effective, and so, some time after she had left the Russian Court, were those of her young brother, the Chevalier D'Eon de Beaumont, who came



Two faces of The Chevalier D'Eon.

to St. Petersburg as an ambassador's secretary. King Louis rewarded him/her with a commission in the Dragoons, and the Chevalier served bravely in several battle-actions of the Seven Years' War.

After the war, D'Eon was sent as secretary to the French Embassy at the Court of St. James', where his unofficial duties as an agent for the King's "Secret" were more important than his official ones. The coming of a new French Ambassador, a mean-spirited snob named Guerchy, brought crisis. A personal feud between the two began, which involved slander and threatened duel, kidnapping and assassination attempts, lawsuits and scandal that titillated English society and embarrassed the French court.

During this period, the rumors about the Chevalier's proper sex began to spread, and in a society as gambling-mad as that of late 18th-century

England, it became an inevitable and highly popular subject for bets. Fortunes were staked on the matter, and the sporting fever was only momentarily cooled when the irate Chevalier appeared at the Stock Exchange, cane in hand, and invited a fight.

In his private fight with Guerchy, the Chevalier won handsomely but the circumstances had led to a loss of confidence, and indeed a nervous fear for the Chevalier's sanity, on the part of his employers at Versailles.

Louis XVI succeeded to the throne and ended the "Secret" system. The Chevalier still had importantly dangerous documents in his possession, and negotiations for their return were entrusted to another witty, talented and ambitious young man, Beaumarchais (whose name has lived in history). The romantic Beaumarchais, convinced that D'Eon was indeed a woman, seems at one point to have proposed marriage, but, as one of the Chevalier's Parisian female acquaintances said in shock: "In truth, this is something that is not done!"

included a Royal Order from Louis for D'Eon "to resume the garment of her sex . . . It being forbidden to her . . . to appear in France otherwise than in the garments of a woman." He/she appeared in France, as the Chevaliers D'Eon—Marie Antoinette gave her the address of her couturiere, Mlle. Berton—and became "the social lioness of the day." His/her last years, from 1785 to 1810, were spent in England, as a woman, and the well-kept secret of sex was not revealed until death.

The Chevalier was male.

"I always think I have caught Fortune by the hair," D'Eon once wrote, "and I always discover that she wears only a wig"—and, on another occasion, "I have been the plaything of Nature . . . I have gone through all the strange vicissitudes of the human condition."

Edna Nixon, an English writer now resident in Geneva, where her husband is an official of the International Labor Office, has written a lucid, entertaining and sympathetic account of this odd adventurer, whose personal life was as tangled as the diplomatic life he helped to weave.